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France Won't Let U.S. Interview Ex-Gestapo Figure

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The French Ministry of Justice has refused a U.S. Justice Department request to interview former Gestapo officer Klaus Barbie, who is imprisoned in France on charges that he ordered the murder of Jews and French resistance fighters in Nazi-occupied France during World War II.

Sources close to the Justice Department's investigation of whether the Army and the State Department cloistered Barbie after the war and helped him escape to Bolivia in 1951 said yesterday that France gave no "satisfactory" explanation for denying access to Barbie in his cell in Lyons, where he has been since his extradition by Bolivia in February.

"Their explanation was that we had no criminal case pending against Barbie," one source said. "Therefore, we had no legal rights to interrogate him on French soil. If they had wanted us to talk to Barbie, they would have let us talk to him no matter what the . . . language . . . in the judicial treaty we have with France."

France and the United States have long had a Judicial Assistance Agreement, which covers requests for records, interviews and extraditions of people accused of crimes in either country. Sources close to the investigation said that France does have the right to deny the U.S. request on grounds that there is no criminal case pending in this country.

For four months the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations has been investigating charges that the United States hid Barbie in the American-occupied zone of Germany from 1945 until 1950, never granted requests to extradite him to France to stand trial and helped him flee to Bolivia in 1951 under the name Klaus Altmann.

Sources said the Justice Department wanted to question Barbie about his involvement with U.S. intelligence officials after the war, and was willing to submit the questions to the French in advance.